
ELECTIONS WITHOUT CHOICE: THE 2004 CAMPAIGN

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SOME KEY POINTS:

** No candidate other than Putin is actually trying to become president; each is a mere tool of some other political force, e.g., the Kremlin*

** Kremlin invests surprising effort to control an election it has in the bag*

** The logic of authoritarianism inevitably leads to repressive excess*

** Kremlin destroying even the illusion of democracy it hopes to project*

** Putin reduces political role of PM's office and government itself*

Since we all know what the results of the presidential election will be, we know that the president will not only stay in office but that he will win in the first round with approximately 75-80% of the vote.

Regardless of one's opinion of Putin, descriptions of the events to take place on March 14 range from farce to national referendum on confidence in Putin. Unlike the Duma elections in December, this election is a none-too-skillful, less-than-serious imitation of free and fair elections. From the get-go, it excluded elements of the democratic process.

First of all, it lacks competition. Not one of the challengers has even the remotest chance of getting enough votes to bargain with the winner for significant political position.

Second, the favorite is not hiding the fact that he is not taking the other candidates seriously, leaving challenging statements unanswered and not participating in debates.

Third, the President is putting nationwide television networks to maximum use, a strategy perfected during the Duma campaign. With Putin's domination of the media, critiques of his activities are by and large absent.

Fourth, the other candidates have no hope of defending their rights. Neither the courts nor the Central Election Commission (CEC) have rendered a single verdict favorable to the challengers, whether it is the refusal to allow Zhirinovskiy to represent Malyshekin in the debates, or the CEC's

ruling that a television broadcast of Putin's meeting with his supporters is not an infringement upon the other candidates' rights.

Finally, in the improbable event that one of the challengers gets more than 5% or that voter turnout is less than 50%, no one doubts that these "mistakes" would be corrected by precinct and district election commissions during vote tabulation, just as they were in the Duma elections.

Thus, the result is predetermined. The majority of Russian voters will vote for the current president, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Only two questions remain:

—Why are other candidates participating in this game that has a predetermined winner?

—Why, despite the obvious absence of competition, is the government making not less but more use of its administrative resources than it did in the Duma elections?

First, let's take a look at who is formally competing with Putin in these elections.

Sergei Mironov is Speaker of the Federation Council, a constitutional organ that has basically squandered its political role since Putin's federal reforms. In many gubernatorial races and elections in the Asian part of the former Soviet Union, Mironov is playing the role of "doubler" in case, due to the vagaries of different candidacies, a leading candidate should find himself running unopposed. His task is to lend a semblance of legitimacy to an undemocratic election. He himself "fully supports the President's policies" and will vote for him. Without an agenda of his own, Mironov is but an instrument of the Kremlin.

Oleg Malyshekin is a Duma deputy, a member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and a fitting response by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who, not wanting to participate in this game, nominated his chief bodyguard, who acquired a reputation during the Duma campaign as a dim-witted

brawler. For Zhirinovskiy, Malyshekin's candidacy meant a chance to continue the intense Duma campaign and to shore up ratings. From the start, however, the CEC and then the Supreme Court deprived Zhirinovskiy of this opportunity by not allowing him to participate in nationally televised debates. Malyshekin is an instrument of the LDPR leader, and does not have his own political goals.

Ivan Rybkin, formerly a member of the ruling state elite as Speaker of the Duma and secretary of the Security Council under Yeltsin, quickly left the political arena with the advent of Putin. As Boris Berezovskiy's chance to remain on the Russian political scene, Rybkin has served as a mouthpiece for the exiled millionaire's anti-Putin statements. Despite his minimal ratings and most Russians' aversion to Berezovskiy, Rybkin was forced to flee to London and then drop out of the race. He is another instrument without his own goals.

Nikolai Kharitonov, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) candidate, is a leader of the Agrarian Party of Russia known for his drive to restore the monument to Dzerzhinsky that used to stand in front of the former KGB's Lubyanka Prison. The KPRF's nomination of this second-string figure is the result of conflict within the party. Because of his dwindled influence, Zyuganov was unable to unite the party behind his push for non-participation in the elections. But the KPRF leadership has not rejected non-participation for good: Kharitonov may drop out of the race yet. His candidacy has been something of a boon to his popularity, but a significant showing on Election day is not expected. A personal victory in the election is not a goal for this candidate.

Irina Khakamada, one of the leaders of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) until its party congress last December, was not even supported by her own

party. She cites the need for a liberal opposition candidate in this race as the basis for her run. She began her campaign with a pointed statement about Putin's responsibility for the lives lost during his response to a terrorist seizure of a crowded Moscow theater in October 2002. However, this statement, which echoes arguments made by Berezovsky, has been the only substantive one made by Khakamada, who now talks most often about the numerous threats to her safety. Her campaign is financed by Boris Nevzlin, a former Yukos chief who is the target of an international investigation by Russian authorities and currently resides in Israel. For all intents and purposes, Khakamada, who is using the campaign to bolster her own ratings, is another instrument of the anti-Putin forces outside Russia, Yukos representatives and Berezovsky. Willingly or not, Khakamada is also an instrument of the Kremlin, legitimizing the elections through the participation of a representative of democratic forces. Therefore, her unanswered appeals to Glaziev and Kharitonov to drop out of the race with her are hardly coincidental.

Sergei Glaziev is an administration economist who joined the opposition Congress of Russian Communities, was later in the KPRF, and then co-founded Motherland, a project aimed at eroding the KPRF's support in the last Duma elections. He was not nominated by his own bloc, which has endorsed Putin. At the start of the campaign, he looked like the President's only serious challenger although his rating never exceeded 4%. A series of scandals connected with a split in Motherland and a conflict with the bloc's other leader, Dmitri Rogozin, substantially hurt Glaziev, whose main task was to strengthen his personal popularity after Motherland's success in the Duma elections. As the most influential of all the opposition candidates, he also serves to legitimize the elections, willingly or not.

From this list, it is evident that running for president is not the goal for any of the candidates, and many of them are not independent figures. Not one major Russian politician with significant name-recognition and his own financial and organizational re-

sources (that is, a party) is running in these elections.

The Russian democratic party Yabloko at first refused to nominate a candidate and later virtually called for a boycott of the presidential elections. An official statement released by the party in February says, "We operate on the assumption that people are seeing a growing limitation of freedom in this country, inequality among the candidates in these pseudo-democratic elections, and candidacies that lack substance and are even comic. We propose that under these circumstances the natural form of protest for people with democratic convictions is non-participation in the elections for president of the Russian Federation."

Permission from above is no longer needed to use administrative resources; their use is becoming the *M.O.* for authorities, anticipating their bosses' will.

Then why, in this utterly predictable situation, is the Kremlin using the same tactics it used in the Duma elections, in which it had a completely different objective – to raise United Russia's percentage and weaken the opposition?

By the logic of the situation, it would be more advantageous to the President if opposition candidates received the maximum number of votes possible without jeopardizing a Putin victory in the first round as that would provide a more convincing imitation of democracy. Instead, one gets the impression that the Kremlin is doing everything to destroy that illusion rather than strengthen it.

The Kremlin takes systematic steps to weaken Glaziev, who has already suffered blows, first Motherland's nomination of Gerashchenko and then the bloc's split. The minimally popular and unpersuasive Rybkin is forced out of the country. There is pressure on Khakamada to tone down the oppositional pitch of her statements.

All the TV networks broadcast Putin's meeting with his supporters, and the CEC rejects Khakamada's and Kharitonov's complaints about unequal air time.

Finally, Putin fires his government and names Mikhail Fradkov, a man no one knows with a less-than-spotless reputation, as the next prime minister.

These steps seem illogical only in the context of the elections. Some have no bearing on the election, others are explained not by the irrational actions of the actual political players but by the inertial logic of bureaucratic decision-making.

The former category includes Putin's speech to his supporters, in which for the first time since he came to power he publicly and unambiguously blamed Yeltsin for corruption and poverty, the impotence of state machinery, and the oligarchs.

The firing of the government and the appointment of a technocrat as its new head is a practical and political step toward freedom from obligation to the Yeltsin "Family" and a statement of Putin's intention to follow his own political course.

By not selecting a political figure – whether United Russia poster boy Boris Gryzlov, Silovik Sergei Ivanov, or "liberal reformer" Aleksei Kudrin – Putin has reduced the political weight of the prime minister's office and of the government as a constitutional organ, the sole mission of which will now become the technical implementation of the president's policies.

As to the pressure on other candidates and the limitation of their electoral rights, this is a consequence of the logic of an authoritarian regime.

After the Duma election, the results of which underscored a rejection of the principle of division of power and a rejection of elements of democracy, actions such as the suppression of even insignificant displays of opposition are completely unavoidable.

Permission from above is no longer needed to use administrative resources, and their use is becoming the *modus operandi* for authorities, anticipating the will of bosses, at any level, from federal to local, and under any circumstance, at least as far as federal elections are concerned.

The real question lies elsewhere: How prepared are society and its elites to accept the new rules of the game? ■